



## ***Media Release***

**October 4, 2012**  
**For Immediate Release**

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### **Western Lake Erie Watersheds Identified as a Priority Natural Area**

*LaSalle, Ontario* – Government representatives, dignitaries and environmentalists from the United States and Canada gathered on Fighting Island in LaSalle, Ontario on September 27<sup>th</sup> to announce the signing of a collaboration agreement for the Western Lake Erie Watersheds Priority Natural Area Initiative. “The Priority Natural Area initiative will provide federal, provincial and local partners with a mechanism to work more closely with our U.S. neighbours and to complement progress being made in the U.S. on the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, and other related initiatives,” explained Richard Wyma, General Manager for the Essex Region Conservation Authority (ERCA).

The Priority Natural Area initiative is a Canadian response to the U.S. Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge and reflects Canada’s commitment to the *Canada-U.S. Conservation Vision for the Lower Detroit River Ecosystem* that was established in 2001. That binational conservation vision called for the establishment of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. Since the vision was signed in 2001, Canadian and U.S. partners have:

- Convened five biennial State of the Strait Conferences that address pressing environmental and natural resource issues;
- Constructed a sturgeon spawning reef off Fighting Island that represented the first ever fish habitat restoration project in the Great Lakes funded with both U.S. and Canadian dollars -- and it was successful with lake sturgeon spawning on the reef for the first time in 30 years on the Canadian side of the Detroit River;
- Completed 46 soft shoreline engineering projects in the watershed to help create a new waterfront porch for wildlife and people;
- Developed a ByWays to FlyWays bird driving tour map to celebrate our world-class birding opportunities in southwest Ontario and southeast Michigan;
- Completed the Detroit River-Western Lake Erie Indicator Project that compiled 30 or more years of data on 50 indicators and completed a comprehensive integrative assessment of ecosystem health; and
- Convened a roundtable on common tern research and management in the watershed.

The Priority Natural Area initiative builds on this foundation of Canada-U.S. cooperation on conserving natural resources, protecting the environment, and realizing the numerous benefits.

More....

The Detroit River and Lake Erie watersheds are home to over 300,000 Canadian residents and are situated in a border region of over nearly seven million people in a one hour drive. In the Essex region, these watersheds lie fully within the Carolinian Zone, which supports the greatest diversity of plant and animal species of any region in Canada.

The western basin of Lake Erie is under great stress from urban and industrial development and rural land use, and is exhibiting signs of degradation. Blue green algae blooms have become a serious issue over the past few years. Significant threats exist to the region's watersheds, tributaries, nearshore and open water areas. Only about 3 % of the area on the Canadian side is protected as national and provincial parks or conservation lands, which is the lowest proportion of protected areas of any region in Ontario.

For these reasons, federal, provincial and local partners including Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Essex Region Conservation Authority, have come together under the umbrella of the Western Lake Erie Watersheds Priority Natural Area initiative to better protect and restore the natural heritage features of this region. "It's a historic day," Jeff Watson, MP for the riding of Essex exclaimed. "This agreement is the first of its kind in Canada and can serve as a model for other areas." Watson credited Congressman John Dingell with having the vision and providing the encouragement that ultimately resulted in this first Collaborative Agreement.

"I am pleased to take part in today's announcement by my good friends in Canada as they complement the progress we are making on the Refuge on the U.S. side of the border," responded Congressman Dingell. "Today's celebration is a monumental step toward our goal of preserving precious wetlands and natural habitat along both sides of the Detroit River and Lake Erie. I applaud our Canadian partners for establishing the Priority Natural Area initiative and look forward to accomplishing even greater things as we move forward together on the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge and other related initiatives."

The Western Lake Erie Watersheds Priority Natural Area initiative envisions enhanced collaboration and coordination of resource management programs and projects. The initiative also intends to effectively engage the broader community as stewards in restoring, enhancing and conserving the unique environmental values and health of the area, thereby making the region more attractive for people to live, work and visit.

"We have a strong history of working together as partners and with our friends in the U.S. for many years on projects like tree planting, shoreline protection, water quality improvements and habitat enhancement," added Ray Renaud, Past Chair of the Essex Region Conservation Authority: "The Priority Natural Area initiative will encourage us to work more closely together and provide focus on this geographic area."

It is anticipated that this agreement will also build on and complement existing programs such as the Detroit River Remedial Action Plan, the Detroit River Canadian Heritage River designation, and the Lake Erie Lakewide Management Plan, and will stimulate further actions in support of existing programs. Program successes will be achieved through the voluntary participation and agreement of partners, public and private landowners and other participants.

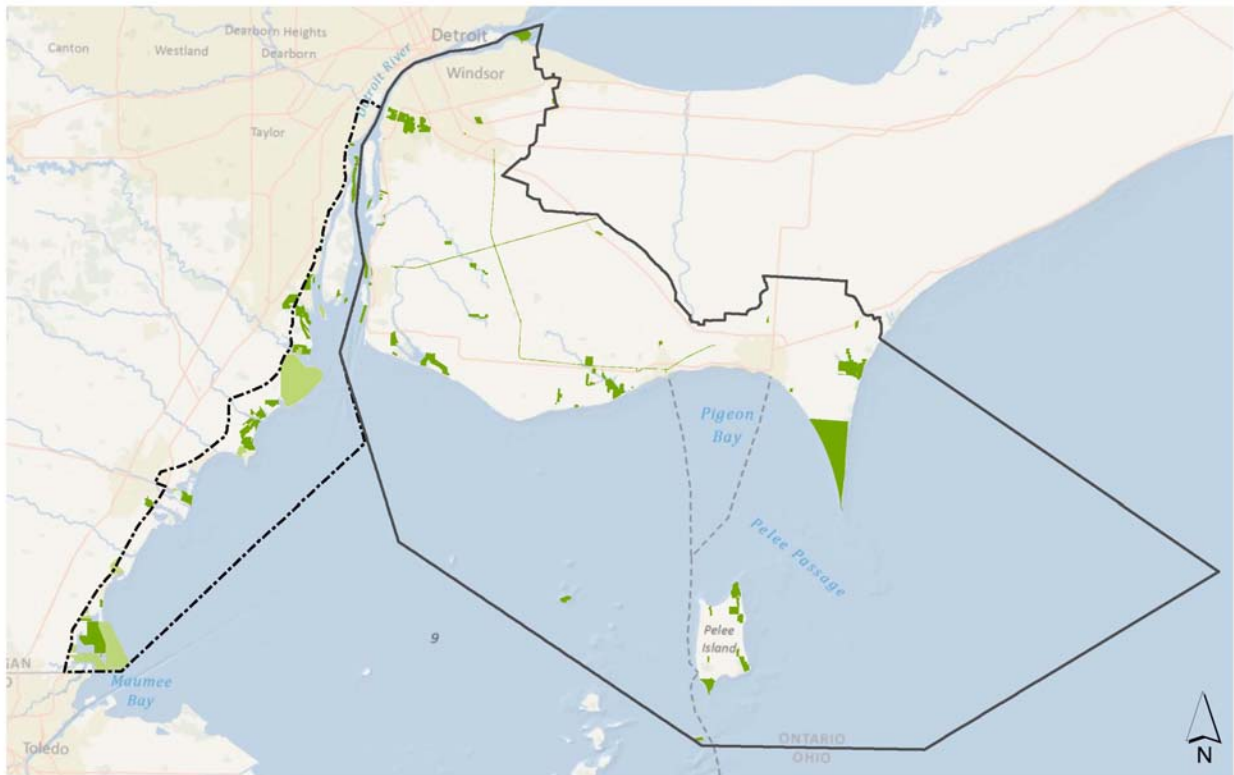
The initiative intends to stimulate, excite and engage the community through education and outreach projects. It is also expected to strengthen research and monitoring, and to build a liveable, sustainable future for the region, and a community that recognizes the relationships between healthy environment, healthy people and healthy economy.

More....

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### Map of Canadian Priority Natural Area Boundary and U.S. Refuge Acquisition Boundary



#### Legend

- Canadian Priority Natural Area Boundary
- Canadian Protected Lands
- United States Refuge Acquisition Boundary
- Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge Lands
- Michigan DNR Protected Lands

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